

DUXBURY DATEBOARDS:

First historic home built by 'free man of color'

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SPECIAL TO THE CLIPPER

The DR&HS issues "dateboards" to roughly five houses per year. The purpose is to authenticate, using research standards, the construction date of a home and to place any historical information available about that home on file in our archives. This recent dateboarded home has a singular historical distinction.

The William Sherburn house is, perhaps, a unique house in the early history of Duxbury. Why is it so rare? It is not because of the architecture, the style or the size of the house. The house is not unusual in and of itself. It was just a humble dwelling in its infancy. It was not built by a man of wealth or prominence. The builder was an unskilled man of limited means. It is remarkable in that, to the best of my knowledge, there is no other dateboarded house in Duxbury having been built by an African-American.

The current proud owner of this charming dwelling located at 1112 Tremont Street, is Sarie Booy. The original structure is now mostly hidden in the revisions, architectural changes and modernization done to it over the years. The dwelling has evolved into a charming, warm and inviting home.

Although the Hingham Vital Records show he was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts and his father's name was

Peter, I was unable to verify this. His death was recorded on Sept. 6, 1862 and stated William was buried in Duxbury. Based upon the date he died and his age at that time, I was able to approximate his date of birth to be about June 17, 1814.

Sherburn married first, Hannah W. Fuller, in Duxbury, April 17, 1840. They had two daughters, Hannah, born Nov. 13, 1840 and Ann M., born Aug. 26, 1844. Hannah died of consumption on April 19, 1845 at age 23.

He married second, Mary Ann Williams in Duxbury, on April 28, 1849 and had three more children.

Sherburn was listed in the Duxbury Records as a laborer and a "free man of color." The 1850 Census states he is a "worker." The Duxbury Annual Report for the year 1858 revealed he no longer owned any real estate, was still a resident of Duxbury and was levied a poll tax in the amount of \$1.67. This confirms, as a freeman under Massachusetts law, he shared the same voting rights as other Duxbury residents. At this time, the right to vote was denied to many black men, not only in the South, but in some northern states as well.

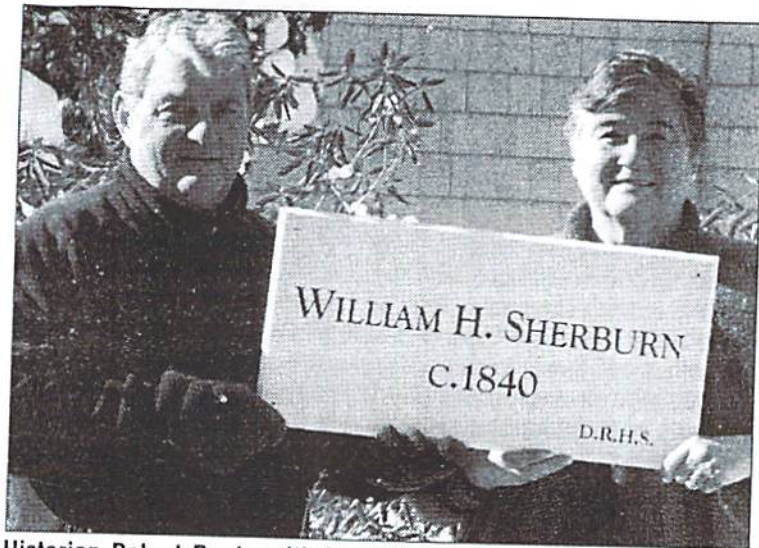
William bought his 45 square rods of Duxbury land from Barker Hunt on Oct. 13, 1840. On May 11, 1842, he sold his land "together with the dwelling I now occupy and all buildings situated thereon," to Benjamin Barstow, Samuel Knowles and Nathaniel Ford for \$300. This indicates the subject house was built between 1840 and 1842.

He had married his first wife, Hannah, on April 17, 1840. Given the date of birth of their first daughter, Hannah was either pregnant when he married her, or she became pregnant immediately after. At the time, they must have been either renting a small house or living with a family by whom William was employed. Because Barker Hunt sold him his small lot, and because Barker owned the old "Hunt House" abutting the subject property on the south side, he may have been a servant working for Hunt. Whatever the case may have been, when he bought his quarter acre of land, it was with the intent to build a house for himself and his family.

A man of modest means, Sherburn built a very small house. The original house, now hidden within the current house by additions, was a very humble dwelling at best. Therefore, the dwelling could easily have been erected between Oct. 13, 1840 when he bought his land and Nov. 13, 1840 when his first child was born. If it was not constructed by that time, there was certainly ample time to complete such a small dwelling prior to January 1841. It would therefore seem most reasonable that the house was built in 1840.

He sold his house in 1842. However, the records prove he was still residing in Duxbury until at least March 1, 1859. There is a strong possibility that he continued living in the house he built and rented it from the new owners. Records show that Sherburn had moved to Hingham by 1860.

Of all the date-boarded houses in Duxbury to date, the William H. Sherburn house stands out as being the only one now documented as having been built by a "man of color."



Historian Robert Dente with homeowner Sarie Booy in front of the William H. Sherburn House which was built circa 1840. Of all the date-boarded houses in Duxbury to date, the William H. Sherburn house stands out as being the only one now documented as having been built by an African-American. Sherburn was listed in the Duxbury Records as a laborer and a "free man of color."